



The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment

Reading Item and Scoring Sampler

SUPPLEMENT

2009–2010
Grade 8

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INTRODUCTION

The 2009–2010 Reading Item and Scoring Sampler Supplement displays released items from the 2009 PSSA operational test. The sampler supplement is to be used in conjunction with the previous year’s sampler. The 2008–2009 Reading Item and Scoring Sampler can be found on the PDE website at <http://www.pde.state.pa.us/>. Select the “Pre K–12 Schools” tab at the top of the page. Then select “Assessment” in the “Learn About” column to the left. Select “Resource Materials” in the “Learn About” column of the next page, and then scroll down to find the appropriate sampler. Alternately, you may type in or click this link to reach the location of the item samplers: http://www.pde.state.pa.us/a_and_t/cwp/view.asp?a=108&Q=73314&a_and_tNav=680&a_and_tNav=

This item and scoring sampler supplement contains multiple-choice items and an open-ended item. Each item is preceded by the Assessment Anchor and Eligible Content coding. The multiple-choice answer options are followed by an annotation that explains why the correct answer is correct and the other answer options are incorrect. The correct answer is indicated by an asterisk. The table following each multiple-choice item displays the percentages of students who chose each answer option. The correct answer is also shaded in these tables. The table following the open-ended item indicates the students’ performance at each score point. Sample student responses for each of the scoring levels are also included for the open-ended item.

READING PASSAGE

Read the following passage about a child who meets an unusual neighbor. Then answer questions 1–8.

The Countess and the Impossible

by Richard Thurman

No one in our Utah town knew where the Countess had come from; her carefully precise English indicated that she was not a native American. From the size of her house and staff we knew that she must be wealthy, but she never entertained and she made it clear that when she was at home she was completely inaccessible. Only when she stepped outdoors did she become at all a public figure—and then chiefly to the small fry of the town, who lived in awe of her.

One day when I was about thirteen, as I was short-cutting through her hedge, she surprised me.

“Young man, I want to talk to you,” she said. I was expecting a lecture on trespassing, but as she looked at me, half smiling, she seemed to change her mind.

“Don’t you live in that green house with the willow trees in the next block?”

“Yes, ma’am.” . . .

“Good. I’ve lost my gardener. Be at my house Thursday morning at seven, and don’t tell me you have something else to do; I’ve seen you slouching around on Thursdays.”

When the Countess gave an order, it was carried out. I didn’t dare not come on that next Thursday. I went over the whole lawn three times with a mower before she was

satisfied and then she had me down on all fours looking for weeds until my knees were as green as the grass. She finally called me up to the porch.

“Well, young man, how much do you want for your day’s work?”

“I don’t know. Fifty cents, maybe.”

“Is that what you figure you’re worth?”

“Yes’m. About that.”

“Very well. Here’s the fifty cents you say you’re worth and here’s the dollar and a half more that I’ve earned for you by pushing you. Now I’m going to tell you something about how you and I are going to work together. There are as many ways of mowing a lawn as there are people, and they may be worth anywhere from a penny to five dollars. Let’s say that a three-dollar job would be just what you have done today, except that you’d have to be something of a fool to spend that much time on a lawn. A five-dollar lawn is, well, it’s impossible, so we’ll forget about that. Now then, each week I’m going to pay you according to your own evaluation of your work.”

I left with my two dollars, richer than I remembered being in my whole life, and determined that I would get four dollars out of her the next week. But I failed to reach

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even the three dollar mark. My will began to falter the second time around her yard.

“Two dollars again, eh? That kind of job puts you right on the edge of being dismissed, young man.”

“Yes’m. But I’ll do better next week.”

And somehow I did. The last time around the lawn I was exhausted, but I found I could spur myself on. In the exhilaration of that new feeling, I had no hesitation in asking the Countess for three dollars.

Each Thursday for the next four or five weeks, I varied between a three and a three-and-a-half dollar job. The more I became more acquainted with her lawn, places where the ground was a little high or a little low, places where it needed to be clipped short or left long on the edges to make a more satisfying curve along the garden, the more I became aware of just what a four-dollar lawn would consist of. And each week I would resolve to do just that kind of a job. But by the time I had made my three dollar or three-and-a-half dollar mark I was too tired to remember even having had the ambition to go beyond that.

“You look like a good consistent \$3.50 man,” she would say as she handed me the money.

“I guess so” I would say, too happy at the sight of the money to remember that I had shot for something higher.

“Well, don’t feel too bad,” she would comfort me. “After all, there are only a handful of people in the world who could do a four-dollar job.”

And her words were a comfort at first, but then an irritant that made me resolve to do that four-dollar job. In the fever of my resolve, I imagined the Countess handing me the four dollars with a tear in her eye, begging my forgiveness for having thought I couldn’t do it.

It was in the middle of such a fever, one Thursday night when I was trying to forget the day’s defeat and get some sleep, that the truth hit me so hard that I sat upright, half choking in my excitement. It was the five-dollar job I had to do, not the four-dollar one! I had to do the job that no one could do because it was impossible.

I was well acquainted with the difficulties ahead. I had the problem, for example, of doing something about the worm mounds in the lawn. The Countess might not even have noticed them yet, they were so small; but in my bare feet I knew about them and I had to do something about them. And I could go on trimming the garden edges with shears, but I knew that a five-dollar lawn demanded that I line up each edge exactly with a yard stick and then trim it precisely with the edger. And there were other problems that only I and my bare feet knew about.

I started the next Thursday by ironing out the worm mounds with a heavy roller. After two hours of that I was ready to give up for the day. Nine o’clock in the morning, and my will was already gone! It was only by accident that I discovered how to regain it. Sitting under a walnut tree for a few minutes after finishing the rolling, I fell asleep. When I woke up minutes later, the lawn looked so good and felt so good under my feet, I was anxious to get on with the job.

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I followed this secret for the rest of the day, dozing for a few minutes every hour to regain my perspective and replenish my strength. Between naps, I mowed four times, two times lengthwise, two times across, until the lawn looked like a green velvet checkerboard. Then I dug around every tree, crumbling the big clods and smoothing the soil with my hands, then finished with the edger, meticulously lining up each stroke so that the effect would be perfectly symmetrical. And I carefully trimmed the grass between the flagstones of the front walk. The shears wore my fingers raw, but the walk never looked better.

Finally about eight o'clock that evening it was all completed. I was so proud I didn't even feel tired when I went up to her door.

"Well, what is it today?" she asked.

"Five dollars," I said, trying for a little calm and sophistication.

"Five dollars? You mean four dollars, don't you? I told you that a five-dollar lawn job isn't possible."

"Yes it is. I just did it."

"Well, young man, the first five-dollar lawn in history certainly deserves some looking around."

We walked about the lawn together in the light of evening, and even I was quite overcome by the impossibility of what I had done.

"Young man," she said, putting her hand on my shoulder, "what on earth made you do such a crazy, wonderful thing?"

I didn't know why, but even if I had, I could not have explained it in the excitement of hearing that I had done it.

"I think I know," she continued, "how you felt when this idea first came to you of caring for a lawn that I told you was impossible. It made you very happy when it first came, then a little frightened. Am I right?"

She could see she was right by the startled look on my face.

"I know how you felt, because the same thing happens to almost everyone. They feel this sudden burst in them of wanting to do some great thing. They feel a wonderful happiness but then it passes because they have said, 'No, I can't do that. It's impossible.' Whenever something in you says, 'It's impossible,' remember to take a careful look and see if it isn't really asking you to grow an inch, or a foot, or a mile, that you may come to a fuller life."

Since that time, some 25 years ago, when I have felt myself at an end with nothing before me, suddenly, with the appearance of that word, "impossible," I have experienced the unexpected lift, the leap inside me, and known that the only possible way lay through the very middle of impossible.

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MULTIPLE-CHOICE ITEMS

Note: All percentages listed in the tables below the items have been rounded.

A.1.4.1

1. The Countess knew the narrator could mow her lawn on Thursdays because she
- A had seen that he had nothing to do. *
 - B caught him cutting through her hedges.
 - C had seen his house on the next block.
 - D thought he looked like a hard worker.

The student is asked to identify how the Countess knew the narrator was available to work on Thursdays. In a dialogue between the two characters, the narrator is told by the Countess that he has been noticed "slouching around on Thursdays." This idea is described in option A as having "nothing to do." Options B, C, and D do not reference the narrator's availability on Thursdays.

A	B	C	D
85%	8%	4%	3%

A.1.4.1

2. The first time the narrator mows the Countess's lawn is after he
- A evaluates the work he did.
 - B naps under her walnut trees.
 - C pushes himself to do a perfect job.
 - D gets caught walking through her hedges. *

The student is asked to identify an event from the passage that occurs before the first time the narrator works for the Countess. Option D contains the only example that occurs before the narrator mows the lawn for the first time. The events described in options A, B, and C occur later in the passage.

A	B	C	D
11%	4%	10%	74%

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B.1.1.1

3. Which word **best** describes how the townspeople feel about the Countess?

- A awed *
- B resentful
- C delighted
- D indifferent

The student is asked to interpret how the townspeople feel about the Countess. In the opening paragraph, it is stated that the townspeople “lived in awe” of the Countess, making option A the correct answer. Options B, C, and D offer descriptions that do not accurately reflect the feelings of the townspeople.

A	B	C	D
55%	14%	11%	19%

A.1.4.1

4. This passage is mainly about a young man who

- A falls asleep under a walnut tree.
- B takes short cuts through a neighbor’s hedge.
- C wonders about a neighbor’s past.
- D finds a new way to confront a challenge. *

The student is asked to identify the main idea of the passage. Option D best states the main idea of the passage, which describes how the narrator confronts personal challenge by finding the way “through the very middle of impossible.” Options A, B, and C refer to aspects or details of the passage that do not reflect the main idea.

A	B	C	D
2%	7%	4%	87%

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A.1.1.2

5. Read the sentence from the passage.

“ . . . I knew that a five-dollar lawn demanded that I line up each edge exactly with a yard stick and then trim it precisely with the edger.”

Which is a synonym for the word precisely?

- A slowly
- B formally
- C definitely
- D accurately *

The student is asked to identify a synonym for “precisely.” The sentence included from the passage uses the words “line up” and “exactly,” which support option D as the correct answer. Options A, B, and C do not reflect the same idea.

A	B	C	D
5%	6%	8%	81%

B.1.1.1

6. The climax of the passage occurs when the narrator

- A asks the Countess for five dollars. *
- B fails to reach the three dollar mark.
- C expects a lecture from the Countess.
- D falls asleep under the walnut tree.

The student is asked to identify when the climax of the passage occurs. The plot of the passage follows the narrator as he does competent work on the lawn and earns \$3.50 in compensation. The narrator feels inspired to go beyond the stated compensation limit of \$4.00. The narrator labors for hours and, being proud of his efforts, requests \$5.00. This action, given in option A, represents the climax of these events. Options B, C, and D refer to events in the story and/or other aspects of the plot that are not the climax.

A	B	C	D
60%	18%	10%	11%

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B.1.1.1

7. In the last paragraph, the narrator can **best** be described as
- A inspired. *
 - B anxious.
 - C hopeful.
 - D troubled.

The student is asked to interpret the emotions of the narrator in the final paragraph. In the last paragraph, the narrator reveals that, although the episode described in the passage had occurred many years ago, whenever faced with similar challenges, he has experienced the same “unexpected lift.” This “lift” is best described in option A (“inspired”). Options B, C, and D describe emotions the narrator experiences at times throughout the passage, but not during the final paragraph.

A	B	C	D
70%	9%	18%	3%

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ITEM-SPECIFIC SCORING GUIDELINE

Item #8

This item is reported under Category B, Interpretation and Analysis of Fictional and Nonfictional Text.

Assessment Anchor:

B.1 – Understand components within and between texts.

Specific Eligible Content addressed by this item:

B.1.1.1 – Explain, interpret, compare, describe, analyze, and/or evaluate the theme of fiction or literary non-fiction.

Scoring Guide:

Score	In response to this item the student—
3	demonstrates <i>complete</i> knowledge of understanding theme by stating the theme of the passage “The Countess and the Impossible” and by using at least two examples from the passage to explain the response.
2	demonstrates <i>partial</i> knowledge of understanding theme by stating the theme of the passage “The Countess and the Impossible” and by using one example from the passage to explain the response. (Example: Student states the theme of the passage “The Countess and the Impossible” and uses one example from the passage to explain the response.)
1	demonstrates <i>incomplete</i> knowledge of understanding theme by only stating the theme of the passage “The Countess and the Impossible.” (Example: Student states the theme of the passage “The Countess and the Impossible” without using any examples from the passage to explain the response.)
0	has given a response that provides <i>insufficient</i> material for scoring or is inaccurate in all respects.
Non-scorable	BLK (blank)... No response or written refusal to respond or too brief to determine response OT Off task/topic LOE..... Response in a language other than English IL..... Illegible

Example—Top Scoring Response (3 Points):

Theme and Examples
<p>“Through hard work and determination any challenge can be surmounted” is the theme of “The Countess and the Impossible.” In the passage the narrator is challenged by both the Countess and himself. For example, after the second time doing mediocre quality yard work, the narrator tells the Countess, “I’ll do better next week” and despite exhaustion he “spurs” himself to do better work. Later in the passage, the narrator considers what a five-dollar job would entail (leveling out worm mounds, trimming while using a yard stick, etc.) and through great effort, he accomplishes the “impossible,” the five-dollar job.</p>

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OPEN-ENDED ITEM RESPONSES

B.1.1.1 Response Score: 3

8. State the theme of the passage "The Countess and the Impossible." Use at least two examples from the passage to explain your response.

The theme of "The Countess and the Impossible" is to teach people that if you are motivative and determined enough then you can achieve anything. The boy started out his job, gardening, with the thought that the job he completed was worth only 50 cents. Countess wanted him to achieve more so she gave him a bonus of \$1.50. This motivated the boy at first to receive \$4.00 for his work. Then when he was averaging \$3.50 he realize one night that it wasn't the \$4.00 job that he wanted it was the impossible \$5.00. He thought of many ideas in which he could improve his job, like rolling out the worm mounds, and cutting between flagstones. The next time he went to work he completed those things and then some. After a long days work received a \$5.00 job. This goes to show that this little boy was motivated and determined to complete a \$5.00 worth of pay, that anyone can accomplish anything if they put their minds to it.

The student has given a complete answer to the task by stating the theme of the passage ("... if you are motivative and determined enough then you can achieve anything") and by using two examples from the passage ("... when he was averaging \$3.50 he realize... that it wasn't the \$4.00 job that he wanted it was the impossible \$5.00" and "After a long days work received a \$5.00 job") to explain the response.

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B.1.1.1 Response Score: 2

8. State the theme of the passage "The Countess and the Impossible." Use at least two examples from the passage to explain your response.

<p>I think the theme of this passage would be something like, nothing is impossible and if you try hard enough you will acheive your goals. I think that would be a good passage because when countess says a five dollar lawn is impossible and the narrator goes and tries as hard as he could he got it. The Countess was proud of him and he was proud of himself.</p>	
<p>The student provides a partial answer to the task by stating the theme of the passage ("... nothing is impossible and if you try hard enough you will acheive your goals") and by using one example from the passage ("... when countess says a five dollar lawn is impossible and the narrator goes and tries as hard as he could he got it") to explain the response.</p>	

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B.1.1.1 Response Score: 2

8. State the theme of the passage "The Countess and the Impossible." Use at least two examples from the passage to explain your response.

<p>The theme of "The Countess and the Impossible" is that when something is supposeivley impossible you can always try harder and might achieve it.</p> <p>In the story the kid pictures himself doing the 5 dollar job. He imagines what it will look like. He imagines the worms, the hedges in perfect symetry, and the lawn the right length. Then he works for hours and gets it done because he put his mind to it. He tried harder and beat the impossible.</p>
<p>The student has given a partial answer to the task by stating the theme of the passage ("... when something is supposeivley impossible you can always try harder and might achieve it") and by using one example from the passage ("... the kid pictures himself doing the 5 dollar job") to explain the response.</p>

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B.1.1.1 Response Score: 1

8. State the theme of the passage "The Countess and the Impossible." Use at least two examples from the passage to explain your response.

I think the theme is about that if you try really hard a put your mind to it you can do anything you want to do.

The student has given an incomplete answer to the task by stating the theme of the passage ("... if you try really hard a put your mind to it you can do anything ...") without using any examples from the passage to explain the response.

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B.1.1.1 Response Score: 1

8. State the theme of the passage "The Countess and the Impossible." Use at least two examples from the passage to explain your response.

The theme of this paragraph is to do things you never thought you could do because you might be suprised with the results,

The student has given an incomplete answer to the task by stating the theme of the passage ("... to do things you never thought you could do because you might be suprised with the results") without using any examples to explain the response.

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B.1.1.1 Response Score: 0

8. State the theme of the passage “The Countess and the Impossible.” Use at least two examples from the passage to explain your response.

The theme of the passage is calm because nothing really happens in the town.

The student has given an insufficient answer to the task.

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SUMMATIVE DATA TABLE

Multiple-Choice Items

Sampler Sequence	A	B	C	D
1	85%	8%	4%	3%
2	11%	4%	10%	74%
3	55%	14%	11%	19%
4	2%	7%	4%	87%
5	5%	6%	8%	81%
6	60%	18%	10%	11%
7	70%	9%	18%	3%

Open-Ended Item

Sampler Sequence	Score Point 3	Score Point 2	Score Point 1	Score Point 0
8	17%	51%	20%	11%

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Acknowledgements

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Grade 8
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